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PRIORITY THEMES

DEVELOPMENT: INTEGRATION OF WOMEN IN THE PROCESS OF DEVELOPMENT

Statement submitted by the following non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council: International Alliance of Women - Equal Rights, Equal Responsibilities, International Federation of Business and Professional Women and Soroptimist International (category I); American Association of Retired Persons, Bahá'í International Community, International Association for Religious Freedom, International Association of Women in Radio and Television, International Federation for Home Economics, International Federation of University Women, Pan-Pacific and South-East Asia Women's Association, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, World Federation of Methodist Women and World Movement of Mothers (category II); and International Institute of Rural Reconstruction (roster)

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is circulated in accordance with paragraphs 29 and 30 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV) of 23 May 1968.

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It is especially important that the large numbers of refugees and displaced women should be considered when policies are defined and steps taken to achieve the integration of women in the process of development. With women constituting close to 80 per cent of the refugee population, the promotion of development must be a key element at all stages of assisting, protecting and repatriating refugee women.

The first years of the 1990s have seen dramatic shifts in the movement of peoples. Events such as the fall of the Berlin Wall, the freeing of the nations of Eastern Europe, the demise of the Soviet Union and the Gulf War have resulted in large flows of refugees as well as economic migrants across the face of the earth.

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In its "Information Note on UNHCR's Guidelines on the Protection of Refugee Women" prepared for the forty-second session of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme (EXCOM), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) pointed out:

> "International protection, however, goes beyond adherence to legal principles. Equally important, the protection of refugee women requires planning and common sense in establishing programmes and enforcing priorities that support their safety and well-being. Thus, international protection and refugee women must be understood in its widest sense. Refugee women who are unable to feed, clothe and shelter themselves and their children, for example, will be more vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse in order to obtain such necessities.
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> "The intrinsic relationship which exists between protection and assistance is particularly evident in relation to refugee women. The guidelines underline that protection concerns can often be best addressed through assistance-related measures. Conversely, the planning and implementation of assistance programmes can have direct, and sometimes, adverse consequences for the protection of refugee women if their specific needs are ignored."

One of the most important functions of UNHCR is to plan for and oversee the repatriation of refugees, most of whom are women and children. As political solutions are found in some of the most troubled areas of the earth i.e. Angola, Cambodia, Namibia and the Central American countries, millions of those who fled will return to their homelands. It is hoped that in the coming years more such solutions will be arrived at so that other large populations, such as the Afghans, will be able to leave refugee camps and return to their homes.

Proper planning for their return must be made by UNHCR together with other United Nations agencies and private organizations. From the very beginning, the repatriation process should include appropriate development strategies to be built into the programmes. Development programmes must be formulated taking into account the particular needs, interests, desires and resources of the refugee women themselves. These remarkable women who have survived and taken care of themselves and their families despite overwhelming obstacles should be consulted at all stages of the planning process.

Repatriation efforts undertaken by UNHCR should involve United Nations development agencies and private organizations whenever possible. An example of a successful and fruitful cooperative effort is the CIREFCA PROCESS in Central America, which was undertaken by UNHCR and a unit of the United Nations Development Programme. CIREFCA demonstrated the benefits to both the refugees and host population of bringing a development agency into the repatriation process.

The Special Advisor to the High Commissioner pointed out:

> "It is no longer possible to look upon voluntary repatriation projects as commando operations that require a militaristic approach and do not take into account the rehabilitation or reintegration of the refugees. Yet the dignity of a refugee depends on the conditions and opportunities offered. A return to poverty is a humiliation hard to bear after so many years of suffering.

"Thus, voluntary repatriation must be conceived as a durable solution which takes into consideration both the overall planning of the practical and political modalities of return, and the reintegration of the refugees into the national economy and culture. The refugees become citizen-agents of development. UNHCR cannot do without development experts if it intends to master the voluntary repatriation process." 1/

We call upon the Commission on the Status of Women as it considers the priority theme of development to use all the means at its disposal, both at the United Nations and with individual Governments, to persuade them to include development strategies in the repatriation process of millions of refugee women.

1/ Marie Angelique Savane, in REFUGEES, October 1991.